

**House Bill 370**  
**Bill to abolish the Death Penalty**  
***The Most Rev. Michael W. Warfel***  
**Bishop of Great Falls-Billings**  
**February 14, 2013**

My name is Bishop Michael W. Warfel, and I am the Roman Catholic Bishop of the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings. Today I am speaking on behalf of our State Catholic Conference, which represents both the Diocese of Helena and the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings, and the estimated 125,000 citizens who identify themselves as Roman Catholic in the State of Montana.

We understand that as Legislators you are striving to address questions associated with the death penalty, and wanting to make decisions that are responsible, informed and humane. I appreciate the opportunity to share a couple thoughts with you today, which may perhaps help you in your quest.

Pope John Paul II called to end the death penalty in the United States, January 27, 1999, in St Louis Mo with these words.

*"The new evangelization calls for followers of Christ who are unconditionally pro-life: who proclaim, celebrate and serve the gospel of Life in every situation. A sign of hope is the increasing recognition that the dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil. Modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform. I renew the appeal I made most recently at Christmas for a consensus to end the death penalty"*

The Catholic Church holds the position that all life is sacred from the moment of conception until natural death. This vision is predicated upon the conviction that God alone is the Author of life and therefore the sole arbiter of death. We believe that a person's worth is inherent, even when their actions have been sub-human or their life decisions inhumane.

Our position on the death penalty is coupled with a strong sense of solidarity with victims of violent crime and their families, whose lives and sense of well-being have been altered forever. We acknowledge that except for other victims of violent crime, none of us can ever appreciate fully the anguish they have experienced or the struggles they endure on a daily basis. We want to stand in solidarity with them, minister among them, and to pray for their healing and security, particularly at this time when legislative hearings and media interest re-open the tender wounds left by the losses they have endured.

The Catholic Church's position flows from a Gospel vision that acknowledges every person as redeemable and every soul salvageable. We support and applaud the

courageous testimony of those crime victims who have warned against the futility of an "eye for an eye" mentality, and who ardently desire to break the cycle of violence that is perpetuated by the death penalty mentality. Their lives have been living testimony to the power of restorative justice, and underscore the Church's long held conviction that even the most hardened criminal can experience redemption and a change of heart. This vision of human life prompts us to conclude that the death penalty should be replaced by values that interrupt the cycle of violence and create opportunities for restorative justice, redemption, and healing for all. The Sacrifice of the Cross promises redemption for all that seek it, and we should never interrupt that opportunity for redemption especially for those that have done great wrongs in their lives.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once reflected that "darkness cannot put out darkness. Only light can do that." The Catholic Church challenges the State's position that you teach killing is wrong by killing killers. Such is the message of state-sanctioned homicide. We hold that the dismantling of the death penalty machinery in favor of life in prison without the possibility of parole will help to address the moral incongruity presented by the death penalty laws that are now on the books in the State of Montana as well as facilitate the creation of a more light and life-giving society.

Finally, we hold that advances in public safety, including penal technology and the intensive management of prison populations, provide the means necessary to make the death penalty dated, obsolete, and unnecessary.

We believe that the late Pope John Paul II expresses accurately our moral position: "If bloodless means are sufficient to defend human lives against an aggressor and to protect public order and the safety of persons, public authority must limit itself to such means .... " We hold that these advances are well in place in the State of Montana.

In sum, the Catholic Church in the State of Montana stands in support of House Bill 370, to abolish the death penalty in favor of life in prison without the possibility of parole. We hold that this bill secures public safety, promotes restorative justice, provides moral consonance, and helps to break the tragic cycle of violence.

We ask you, the members of the House Judiciary Committee, to favor the higher moral ground presented by HB 370, which will help us promote a Culture of Life in our great State of Montana.